

APPENDIX N. Fire Management Plan Summary

The Department of the Interior (DOI) fire management policy requires that all refuges with vegetation that can sustain fire must have a Fire Management Plan that details fire management guidelines for operational procedures and values to be protected or enhanced (620 DM 1). The Fire Management Plan (FMP) for Steigerwald Lake, Franz Lake, and Pierce National Wildlife Refuges (Gorge Refuges) provides guidance on preparedness, prescribed fire, wildland fire, and prevention. Values to be considered in the FMP include protection of Refuge resources and neighboring private properties, effects of burning on Refuge habitats and biota, and firefighter safety. Refuge resources include properties, structures, cultural resources, and trust species including Endangered, Threatened, Proposed, Candidate, and species of special concern, along with their associated habitats. The FMP will be reviewed annually to ensure that the fire program is conducted in accordance and evolves with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) mission and the Refuges' goals and objectives.

The FMP "steps down" from the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and associated Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Gorge Refuges. The CCP is a strategic document that describes the desired future conditions of the Gorge Refuges and provides long-range guidance and direction for their management over the next 15 years. More specific guidance is needed to implement some of the goals and objectives in the CCP. Step-down management plans describe the specific strategies and implementation schedules the USFWS will follow, "stepping down" from general goals and objectives.

The FMP is written as an operational guide for managing the Refuges' wildland fire suppression and prescribed fire programs. It defines levels of protection needed to ensure safety, protect facilities and resources, and restore and perpetuate natural processes, and is consistent with firefighter and public safety requirements, land protection values, and natural resource and cultural resource management plans. Full suppression is the norm for all wildland fires to protect property, structures, and resource values. The FMP will help achieve resource management objectives by enabling the Gorge Refuges to utilize prescribed fire, as one of several tools, to control non-native vegetation, enhance native vegetation, and reduce fire hazards in grassland, woodland, and riparian habitats. It will be used in conjunction with other management tools that are currently applied on Refuge properties (i.e., grazing, mowing, and herbicide applications) to meet resource objectives.

The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) require the FWS to seek public involvement in environmental planning, and to consider all reasonable alternatives, including a "no action" alternative, which represents a continuation of current management practices. Management alternatives for the Gorge Refuges are described in Chapter 3 of the CCP/EA. Anticipated effects of each alternative on the physical, biological, cultural, historic and socioeconomic environment were evaluated, and alternatives adjusted as needed (Chapter 4).

The FMP will comply with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) through submittal of a Biological Evaluation for concurrence to the Ecological Services Division of the USFWS and NOAA-NMFS. Compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act will be accomplished at the project level.

The primary objectives for fire management on the Gorge Refuges are to: (1) promote a program to provide for firefighter and public safety, (2) reduce the threat of and resource impacts of human-caused fires, (3) ensure the appropriate suppression response to meet expected wildland fire complexity, and (4) increase the use of prescribed fire. Specific fire management objectives are:

- Promote a fire management program that includes both a wildland fire suppression component and a prescribed burn component.
- Provide for the protection of life, property, and resources from wildland fires at costs commensurate with resource values at risk.
- Use appropriate suppression tactics and strategies that minimize long-term impacts of suppression actions to natural resources.
- Use prescribed fire to reduce hazard fuel accumulation in forested habitats and excessive debris accumulation of invasive plant species, such as reed canarygrass. Prescribed fire will also be utilized to restore fire to fire-dependent ecological communities, such as oak habitats, and for enhancing wetland and grassland habitats.

There is not an established on-site fire management organization for the Gorge Refuges. A lead fire contact for the Refuges has been proposed, which would be a co-lateral position assigned from the Wildland-Urban Interface group of the Regional fire organization in Portland. The position would be field-based in close proximity to the Columbia River Gorge. The Prescribed Fire Specialist position will be shared with one at Willamette Valley National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

Consistent with the National Interagency Agreement and the guiding principals of Closest Forces, the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area (administered by the Gifford Pinchot National Forest) will provide fire protection and initial attack fire suppression services on the three Gorge Refuges. Various city fire departments will respond to structural fires on USFWS lands.

It is the intent of the USFWS to conduct wildland fire suppression and prescribed fire operations within the Gorge Refuges, which include Franz Lake Refuge, Pierce Refuge, and Steigerwald Lake Refuge.

Copies of the Fire Management Plan are available for review at Steigerwald Lake National Wildlife Refuge, 35501 SE Evergreen Highway, Washougal, WA 98671-6738. Please call ahead to make arrangements for review (360) 835-8767. Copies are also available on the internet at the following address: <http://pacific.fws.gov/planning/>